Drug addiction is a chronic disease. Like any other chronic disease, risk of addiction differs from person to person. No single factor determines whether a person will become addicted to drugs. In general, the more risk factors a person has, the greater the chance that taking drugs will lead to misuse and addiction. Protective factors, on the other hand, reduce a person’s risk of getting addicted. Risk and protective factors may be either environmental or biological.

What environmental factors affect the risk of addiction?
The home environment, especially during childhood, is a very important factor. Parents or older family members who abuse alcohol or drugs, or have criminal behavior, can increase children’s risks of having their own drug problems. On the other hand, a home where family members support and care for each other is a strong protective factor against drug use.

During adolescence, friends can have a very strong effect on each other. Teens without any risk factors can be pressured by friends to try drugs. The school is another place where adolescents can have difficulty. Teens who have academic difficulties or poor social skills are at great risk for abusing drugs, and becoming addicted to them.

What biological factors affect risk of addiction?
Scientists estimate that genetics cause between 40 to 60 percent of a person’s risk for addiction. A person’s age, their biological sex, and certain medical conditions are types of biological factors that can influence risk of addiction.

What other factors increase the risk of addiction?
Drug use at any age can lead to addiction. The earlier in life a person begins using drugs, the more likely they are to develop serious problems such as addiction.

As an example, the part of the brain that allows teens to make good decisions and control their behavior is still developing. This area of the brain is called the **prefrontal cortex**. Since this part of the brain is still developing, young people are at higher risk for making poor decisions
such as trying drugs, or continuing to take them. When a young person abuses drugs, they can cause serious and life-long damage to their brain.

People and their family members who are dealing with mental or substance use disorders, or both, can call the National Helpline at 1-800-662-4357. This is a confidential, free, 24-hour-a-day, 365-day-a-year, information service. It is available in English and Spanish. The National Helpline provides referrals to local treatment centers, support groups, and community-based organizations. Callers can also order free brochures and other information.